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Women's Rights and Human Security

Message of UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch Brown
on the occasion of International Women's Day

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New York, 8 March 2002

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The most striking single social, political and economic transformation of the past century has been the emergence of women as leaders in nearly every country and in every walk of life. But as we celebrate International Women's Day, we also recognize that there is still a long way to go. Whether we are talking about women's presence in legislatures, business and education or simply the right to be protected from violence and discrimination, much more still needs to be done, in both developed and developing countries, to achieve gender equality.

Nowhere is this more important than in communities trying to recover from civil strife and armed conflict. Although there is growing recognition that women and children bear the heaviest consequences of such conflicts, and there is worldwide evidence of increased gender-based violence in these situations, women's participation in peace processes still remains limited.

In recent years, and especially in the last six months, we have seen new and strengthened partnerships of women uniting for peace. UNDP is supporting these groups, not just because it is the right thing to do, but because they have a unique potential to help resolve some of the world's most intractable conflicts.

Through the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), we are developing innovative ways to challenge the use of tradition as a justification for continued violence. Projects supported by UNIFEM are demonstrating how women's groups can work with religious leaders and communities to change attitudes and practices towards female genital mutilation and so-called honour killings. Family by family, community by community, these projects are building respect for the lives of women and girls and an understanding that gender-based violations are not integral part to any tradition or culture. In Sierra Leone, for example, women staged a sit-down strike paralyzing the city of Freetown, requesting the government to implement the Lomé Peace Accord, and forcing officials to provide public daily briefings. In the Philippines, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan, women are setting aside ethnic loyalty and are setting up new partnerships to help ease local tensions. In the Cordillera area of the Philippines, where indigenous people have struggled for decades to defend their traditions and cultures, women are advocating new rules and mechanisms to align national laws and local customs. In Albania, women have been actively involved in UNDP's 'weapons for development' project that has taken thousands of weapons and tons of ammunition out of circulation. They have played a critical role in convincing their communities to surrender weapons.

Some of UNDP's most successful initiatives are based on an understanding of the necessary link between sustainable peace building and women's participation in decision-making. In Botswana, Kenya, Rwanda, Swaziland, Tanzania and Uganda, UNDP is supporting efforts by coalitions of non-governmental organizations and parliamentarians to remove legal constraints on women's involvement in political processes. In Pakistan, we are supporting a nationwide information and awareness campaign, including orientation meetings at the grassroots level, to help the government achieve its goal of having women fill at least one-third of the seats in local government. In India, which has set a similar goal of one-third participation of women in local government, we are giving the newly elected officials training in modern techniques of public administration.

Now, in Afghanistan, we have an historic opportunity to support human rights and the empowerment of women. In Afghanistan, as anywhere else, no arguments of cultural relativism or tactical caution should deflect from the need to help women rapidly advance their status. We must ensure not just ambitious efforts to guarantee equal access, but also that women are directly integrated into all aspects of planning for the overall recovery effort. There needs to be an especially strong focus on critical issue of girls' education, which has been neglected for so long. And we are working with Afghan women's groups to help them participate fully in the future governance of the country.

What happened to women in Afghanistan demonstrates that the way in which a country or community treats women and protects their human rights is one of the best indicators of its respect for international norms and standards more generally.

We all, in developed and developing country alike, have a stake in providing choices and opportunities for those who have never had them: education for girls who have been denied it; protection from abuse at home and in the workplace for wives and mothers who have long had to endure it silently; and access to real political and economic power for all women in every country.